

The Stages of Childhood

The Second Stage – 7 – 14 years

From the ages of seven to fourteen, a child goes through systematic learning. During that stage things become more serious, and the training of the child is intense. All aspects of training; religious teachings, academic education, Akhlaq, helping the parents, . . . are taught during this time. A child learns the correct way of doing things, being organized, neat, orderly, punctual, regular, carrying out religious commandments, doing chores, socializing with others, and all the numerous everyday things which adults often take for granted.

The home is a mini society in which a child learns under the safe shelter of loving parents before he is exposed to the outer world. At home during this stage a child learns how to be an obedient servant of God, play his role in society, carry out his responsibilities, respect and serve others, and all the other duties that make a human being function.

The desires and emotions of a human being are very strong, and if left uncontrolled can prove disastrous. The home teaches a child how to control and discipline himself, how to handle negative emotions. Parents show him the consequences of negative behavior and the unpleasant results of shirking responsibilities. All this is done in a safe environment and the child is trained. When it is time for him to integrate into society he is prepared for it. He does not expect it to attend to his every whim, nor is he vulnerable to its dangers. The teaching of the home during the second seven years is a preparation for the real world that awaits him.

Parents are the teachers who make sure the child learns all that is necessary to learn at this stage. They may not do all the teaching themselves, and seek help of school and Madrasah teachers to also teach their child. But they are responsible for the type of teaching their child receives outside the home.

In today's modern age there are a lot of schooling options which parents need to carefully consider. Muslims schools, Public schools, French immersion, homeschooling the choices are many. Parents need to consider what best fits the need of their child, and the type of person they would like their child to become.

Dr. Ali Qaemi in his book *Khanwadeh wa Niyazmandihaye Kudakan* (The family and the needs of children) writes that the child during this stage has the following unique traits:

1) Vulnerability to outside influences. The child during this time is in constant contact with the outside world. Because of this he is going to be affected more easily. The parent has to be careful and look out for physical as well as emotional and spiritual effects of interaction with others.

2) Ability to plan and achieve. During this time the child begins to choose and make decisions. He is able to plan things and reach his goal. He is less under the force of

impulse and can think out things better. When he wants something and understands its value he can strive to achieve it.

3) Ability to accept Responsibility – The child at this stage likes responsibility. Parents should make him responsible for certain things. They should try not to give him more duties than he can accomplish and at the same time not give him less than what he is capable of.

4) Seeking Independence - The seeds of independence and sometimes rebellion are planted during this stage. Children will question many things during this stage and will often not accept what the parents say. According to Dr. Ali Qaemi this type of rebellion is not very strong at this stage and can be prevented from getting more intense. If it is not handled correctly however, it can lead to stronger rebellion during the third stage.

Parents need to be firm but also loving at the same time. They are in authority and should not be afraid of exercising their rights as parents. Sometimes a parent becomes afraid of the whining of the child, or the smart answers, the defiance etc. At this stage however that type of reaction is not hard set. Parents can counter it by holding their ground but also showing the child that they love them.

Common mistakes during this stage

1) Use of Anger to discipline - Parents often assume that children should automatically know how to do things. If parents don't show them the correct way to do a particular chore, or the appropriate way to socialize with others . . . etc. a child may fail to do it right. There can be no justification for anger then, or for negative consequences. Children have to be taught the correct way of doing things. The teaching should be done in a gentle manner, and when the child does not do things properly parents should point that out and remind the child. If the parent becomes angry and resorts to scolding and labeling the result is often negative. Resentment is created and the child learns to dislike the task. To encourage children towards an action it is necessary for parents to teach positively. Imam Ali (a) has said: *May Allah have mercy on the one who helps his child towards righteousness by being good to him, appealing to him, teaching him knowledge, and training him.*

When a child fails to carry out the teachings and falls short in his duties, there should be consequences in place. A child needs to understand that negative behavior or slacking will have negative consequences. Parents need to choose appropriate consequences to deter a child from continuing such behavior.

2) Too many activities – Some parents would like their children enrolled in various activities and do not allow the child to have much free time. Children are taken to school, Quran class after school, sports activities, tutoring, Madrasah, . . . etc. There is a constant whirl of activities and children do not get time to unwind and relax. This type of stressful lifestyle is not beneficial for the children nor for the parents. It is necessary to cut down

on activities and decide on what is best for the children. Parents should not attempt to compete with other parents in creating a 'busy' life for their children. Parents who wish their children to have calm temperaments and not be prone to outbursts of anger must make sure their children don't have harried lifestyles that are brewing grounds for stress and anger.

3) Giving in to children's demands. In today's times parents are often soft with their children. They provide a lot of comforts and fulfill children's expectations – even unrealistic ones. During the first and second seven years children are given a lot of material and secular advantages. Ranging from the latest toys, books, activities, television and computer time, few chores and duties, children have it all! They learn to be selfish and self centered and then fail to develop correctly into the third stage of being a deputy. Because during the second stage they have had all their needs met and wishes fulfilled without much demanded from them, they cannot suddenly shoulder the responsibilities of being young adults even when they reach the third stage. That is why it is necessary to be firm, even a little hard, during the second stage. There is no need to give everything to the occasional disappointments, all help to harden the child and make him realize that the world does not cater to all his whims.

The second stage can be divided into two separate stages; the one between ages of 8-10 which is still a continuation of childhood, and that of 11-14 which is the beginning of maturity and youth.

During this second stage of maturity the child becomes more sensitive and self conscious. He is affected by others opinions of him and is sometimes negative about himself. He compares himself to others and does not see many of his own positive qualities. This negativity can even be extended to his family. Parents can help the child overcome this and understand that constant reproaches from the parents and comparisons to other children, or unrealistic demands of the child, may result in low self-esteem and even anger and resentment towards the parents. It is necessary to build a healthy self confidence in the child, making him see his own positive side and allowing him to understand that he can work on his negative qualities. This self confidence will allow him to have a strong sense of identity and will make him less vulnerable to outside influences which may try to erode his identity as a Muslim. It is necessary for a child to feel good about himself, not have pride or self conceit, but a sense of confidence in the self. Only then can the child feel good about his family, his background, his religion . . etc.

It is also during this second stage that children need to be taught about sensitive matters such as sexuality, feminine hygiene etc. Parents should be able to talk to the children about this. If they are not comfortable, they should make sure the child gets the information from a reliable source and has somewhere to turn to with questions.

The second stage is an important bridge from childhood to youth. Many characteristics that bear fruit during the time of youth are planted during this stage. If nurtured correctly the stage of youth will be easier and a time for the child to blossom. The training that is done in the second stage must therefore be attended to carefully. Remember the words of

Imam Zainul Abidin (a) who says: *Therefore you should endeavor in his [the child's] training like the person who is going to be adorned by his good influence [upon his child] in this world and [wants to be] vindicated in the presence of his Lord concerning his responsibility about the child.* (Imam Zaynul Abidin (a) in *Risalatul Huqooq*)